

MANJU KAPUR'S A MARRIED WOMAN AND THE STRUGGLE FOR A DISTINCT IDENTITY

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Abstract:

Manju Kapur is one of the most successful Indian women writers whose work, with a delicate appeal, portray the true challenges in the lives of Indian women. She speaks out against women's plight in a patriarchal culture where social, cultural and political factors stand in the way of a new woman. Her novel, *A Married Woman* explores the inner anguish of a new woman who experiences many changes in her life after marriage but ultimately strives for her basic rights of equality, identity and self-satisfaction. The present paper delves into the intricate web of societal expectations, gender roles, and personal desires that shape Astha's identity and unravel the multifaceted layers of her identity crisis.

Keywords: identity, subjugation, sacrifice, tradition, society, expectation, incomplete, balance

Introduction:

Manju Kapur in her second novel *A Married Woman* attempts to re-imagine femininity. *A Married Woman* is a well-balanced depiction of a country's inner development – its strengths and its failures – and the anguish of a woman's unrest, which is as complicated as the social and political upheaval going on around her. It is the classic story of a woman who sacrifices her own individuality for the sake of the family. Manju Kapur has well portrayed the irritation, anguish and travails of Indian middle class –women who are at a loss to condemn social conventions and traditions . Although this is intrinsically an Indian novel, the preoccupation with the displacement of the individual and repression is culturally universal. The novel with “its subtextual celebration of lesbianism”⁽⁴⁾, tries to destabilize the very concept of gender and deconstruct the very concept of the Indian middle class morality and the Sita-Damayanti prototype female models. It seeks to create a new world of women free from traditional discrimination and sex-subjugation. It exposes the predicament of contemporary women in traditional patriarchal society and voices for women's liberation from prejudiced male-dominance.

This second novel by Manju Kapur, begins on an ironic note of subversive challenge, almost caustic in its humor and traces the adolescence and early adulthood of the protagonist through her unquestioning acceptance of the role chosen for her, that of a married woman. The storyline is simple – a married woman struggles to keep her identity intact while seeking equal opportunities within and without the familial threshold. The beginning is conventional, highlighting traditional, middle-class Indian attitudes towards marriage. In this novel Astha, the female protagonist carries the fight of Virmati further to new battlegrounds. Like Kapur's all heroines, she also wants to feel the freedom and challenges the constraints of middleclass

existence. Astha the protagonist, while living the life of a conventional wife to her husband Hemant and a typical Indian mother to her daughter Anuradha and Himanshu, is steering a path of independence, which under normal circumstances an Indian mother wouldn't dare to do.

Astha starts working as a school teacher and this provides her with some respite from domestic drudgery. She leads a seemingly blissful life finding her feet in the teaching profession as well as bearing two children. Yet somehow, underneath all this, lies a life of repression and anguish. She experiences a lack of validation within the marriage, despite two children, a dutiful husband and an enviable lifestyle. Being virtually a single mother as well as a perfect wife and a career woman places an added strain on her. The stress of such a life manifest themselves as severe headaches that she begins to experience. Despite a variety of medical treatments including surgery, the headaches refuse to go away, providing a clue to a split between the protagonist's inner and outer selves. She suffers from a sense of incompleteness, repression and anguish, which is further, aggravated by her involvement into the outer world of rebellion and protest. Her quest for an autonomous identity is predicated on her artistic talent, which blossoms as the result of her confidence in being involved in a just cause. In fighting against communal violence, Astha finds a facet of herself that gives her a sense of power, which manifests itself visually in her paintings. Astha's tentative steps towards independence begin with her trip to Ayodhya. The beginning of the end of Astha's marriage, founded upon her sacrificing her own identity while trying to satisfy the traditional duties of a Hindu wife, coincides with the events leading up to the Babri Masjid demolition. As Anita Nair comments: The key to the plot is the Babri Masjid episode. If one is looking for a metaphor, here it is. A nation falling apart because of differences that can't be bridged. A family falling apart because of differences that can't be bridged".⁽⁵⁾ In order to escape from the tedium of married life, she tries to reach clumsily for a heightened sensational experience of life. Although she tries her best to find her place in family and society, she reaches nowhere because of her moral imbalance and unnatural wishes to be in communion with another woman, Pipee, the widow of Aijaz Khan.

At Ayodhya, she meets Pipeelika, the striking widow of a political street theatre actor. A rapport is quickly established between them, and her usually-controlling husband for once allows her to cultivate the friendship. This instant friendship builds into a bond with shattering consequences for Astha's marriage. However after Astha's trip with her family to Disney World and London the relationship breaks down irreparable. Pipee decides to go to America to pursue her Ph.D. and Astha goes back to her old life. She eventually returns to her family, ensuring that her life follows the conception of femininity found in the dominant Indian tradition.

Astha, the protagonist of *A Married Woman*, seems to be completely oblivious to the oppositional strategies and feminist protests. As one delves into Astha's adult life she appears to be a free spirit trapped in a suffocating traditional society, whose restrictions belie the fact that we are fast approaching the 21st century. Her parents have high expectations from her but none of them understand that their daughter's centre of interest is painting. Her mother keeps putting the traditional thoughts into her mind while her father push her to focus on her studies. She hates her mother's over protection and her father's over expectation. Brought up in such

an environment, Astha is a revolting child from the beginning. As an adolescent Astha is audacious. She protests and expresses her agitation and indignation by seething within whenever she feels she is being smothered by her parents. Thus her revolt is always in the silent manner wherein she keeps all her pain within herself. She invariably craves for true love which leads to her all love affairs. She pushes her frustrations aside, and focuses on her duties as mother, wife and daughter. Her children, husband and increasingly-passionless marital sex take up her life. But the tensions continue to simmer, surfacing from time to time as paralyzing migraines. Torn between her desire to be a dutiful, loving wife to Hemant and her increasing self-confidence as a painter, Astha remains indecisive.

Her relationship with Pipee again portray Astha as a docile character. When she is with Pipee all decisions are taken by her and Astha is just the follower. As with Hemant, here also Astha is worried about Pipee's feelings and is unable to share her own views. She knows that her lesbian relationship would be unacceptable to the tradition bound society and so is always worried that how long it will last. Astha's traditional upbringing keep pinching her to take a set back and as she knows the importance of family she returns back to her husband and children.

A Married Woman is the story of an artist whose desires for her carrier and every now and then extra marital relations challenges the constraints of middle class existence. It sings the quest for Astha's self-identity-her coming to terms with her own self and her similar self. It can be seen as the story of the problems in the relationship of an urban educated (and foreign returned) man and the woman in the post-colonial Indian society. It is a sincere confession of a woman about her personality cult in the personal allegory of a bad marriage. Through the depiction of such characters Manju Kapur in her novel *A Married Woman* has carved out an independent life of the woman for self-fulfillment and advocated for inter-religious marriage and female-female bond contrary to the patriarchal norms of traditional society.

The important thing is that modern women prefer to exercise-her choice and break away from her traumatic experiences. But the roots of tradition, living up to the benchmark of the ideal Indian woman, sacrificing for family, putting self behind, devaluing herself, being content to live in the safety and security of husband, home and family – continually come in conflict with her postmodern sensibilities that lend her wings. Wings to question established norms, to search for her identity, to long for a soul mate, to develop, to enter socially forbidden relationships. Ultimately Astha grows and evolves through these conflicts and transcends into a talented woman, sure of herself and more confident. In the final analysis, perhaps the clue to Astha's future autonomy lies in the meaning of her name, hope. Astha's return to her marital home and her children is based on her hope and a vision of future empowerment and autonomy. In the end Astha reaches nowhere. Ultimately, she has to come back to her family and readjust herself in ancient traditions as Christopher Rollason says:

The women in India have indeed achieved their successes in half a century of independence; but if there is to be a true female independence too, much remains to be done. The fight for autonomy remains an unfinished combat.⁽¹⁰⁾

Very skilfully Manju Kapur has brought the novel to a close by bringing a married woman full



circle back home.

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